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## *Travellers' Accounts as Source-Material for Irish Historians*

Ann-Marie Kilgallon

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# Travellers' Accounts as Source-Material for Irish Historians

Ann-Marie Kilgallon

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## REFERENCES

C. J. Woods, *Travellers' Accounts as Source-Material for Irish Historians*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2009, 248 p, ISBN 978 1 84682 131 8 (hardback); 978-1-84682-132-5 (paperback), 50/24,95 euros

- 1 Walking, touring and journeying over *les chemins d'Irlande*, the Saxon and other travellers have offered up *gleanings, impressions, sketches or letters* about Paddy and his country over several centuries. C. J. Woods's *Travellers' Accounts* is a select repertory of 209 travel accounts of Ireland (accessible in published or manuscript form) spanning the period 1635 to 1950.
- 2 This innovative guide compels attention to travel writing as a source for Irish history, and thus sets a research agenda. Primarily addressed to local historians, it will also interest social and cultural historians, and ethnology, geography and literary specialists.
- 3 Historians are presented here with an annotated corpus of travel accounts, including biographical information on the traveller, details of the trip, indicative content of the account, in addition to a scholarly Introduction.
- 4 Dr. Woods's annotations stress the rich detail in the accounts on Irish local life while the book's Introduction cautions the need to situate the author, his purpose and the differing degrees of authority of the accounts.
- 5 The guide is particularly rich in nineteenth century narratives, especially for the 1830s and 1840s. Only travels with itineraries are listed, facilitating local history studies of particular geographical places.
- 6 Travellers writing about Ireland were from varied origins – about one third of those listed were British while others were Irish, French, German, Dutch, American, even Indian, and

from diverse social positions, professions and religions. Narratives were penned by booksellers, American Quaker merchants, Jansenist religious persons, agriculturalists and more than one army surgeon.

- 7 Thirty accounts of French travellers are annotated by Dr. Woods, with peaks in the periods 1780-1800, 1830-1845, and later 1880s. During the French July Monarchy, Charles de Montalembert, Jules Michelet and Alexis de Tocqueville commented on Irish poverty, social issues, national identity and Catholicism at a moment of social importance in both countries.
- 8 However, in view of certain epistemological challenges posed by the literary genre of travel writing as a source of information for *what was really there*, how will historians use these texts?
- 9 Local historians will have to use the sources examined in this book with discrimination, care, and even in some cases, with scepticism. Cultural historians will be able to undertake studies into perception, representations of poverty, references to home and so on.
- 10 A point which may be added to the Introduction is that readers should be aware of the *nature* of the travel-writing genre, its advantages and particularly its pitfalls, before using it as a source. Engagement with interdisciplinary work, especially by literary specialists, will be important.
- 11 Dr. Woods's valuable, meticulously researched guide draws attention to the large number of these fascinating texts and significantly enhances knowledge about them. *Here's Ireland*, travellers say. Let us investigate more!